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## Making little plans that deliver big impact



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Make some little plans.

The Chicago region needs a lot of little plans, now more than

Extend, for instance, several Metra commuter lines deeper into the suburbs and repair crumbling train viaducts in the city. Lengthen Illinois Highway 53 up through Lake County so it doesn't dump all its northbound traffic onto Lake Cook Road. Make a list of distant farmland, and of nearby foreclosed Get All Your Social Network Updates In On properties, that could be turned into parks, gardens or green space.

> Our region needs hundreds of little improvements that, taken together, will make it a better place to live, raise a family and grow a business.

I point this out because I definitely want you to watch — but not get the wrong idea from — the documentary about Daniel Burnham at 9 p.m. Monday on WTTW Channel 11.

Chicagoans got a sneak preview in December to help mark the centennial of Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago. But Monday will be the first national airing of "Make No Little Plans: Daniel Burnham and the American City."Producer-writer Judith Paine McBrien and her crew at The Archimedia Workshop did a fine job of placing Burnham in the context of American urban history. More salesman than architect, it was Burnham who bred the Progressive Era notion that urban growth could be shaped by an orderly and aesthetic vision, not just chaotic

economic happenstance.

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#### Point taken

Though if you look closely at Burnham's 1909 prescription for a future Chicago, you can't help but be impressed by what did not come to pass. Burnham wanted only low-rise office buildings downtown. Nor did he anticipate the huge impact soon to be imposed on cities by the automobile, then in its infancy. The plan's biggest failing, many agree, was its lack of a prescription for dingy working-class neighborhoods and the social ills brought on by industrialization ... never mind the present dilemma of deindustrialization.

Yet Burnham's overall vision proved a guiding light to successive generations, influencing hundreds of incremental decisions that might have gone the other way. The lakefront is still being saved for public enjoyment, witness the recent conversion of a rail yard into Millennium Park. Think also about voter referendum questions that enabled Lake County to buy and preserve as wetland so much of the upper Des Plaines River flood plain.

Point is, it's the big concepts that matter rather than the technological flavor of the year.

It's a timely lesson because our region is about to make some key decisions about its future. For instance, should we focus our share of precious federal transportation dollars on building a 220 mph bullet train to St. Louis or fix and expand the transit systems we have? Should we install a cost-efficient bus-

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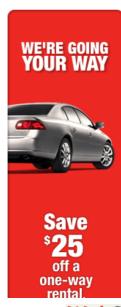


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way on existing rights-of-way to get commuters from the big West Loop train stations to hard-to-reach lakefront and North Michigan Avenue destinations or dig a multilevel transportation center underneath Clinton Street at many times the cost? Should we build a north-south Prairie Parkway through **Kendall County** or an east-west Illiana Expressway that would keep cross-country trucks off our other expressways?

These are no idle questions. Next month the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning is expected to publish a comprehensive regional plan, years in the debating, that spells out such decisions but, in general, stops short of endorsing one project over another. That's because different constituencies have different priorities — city vs. suburbs, motorists vs. trap-hangers, etc. — and CMAP depends on consensus.

Aside from its indecisiveness, there is much to like about the "Go To 2040" plan, especially its prime exhortation to "Encourage more compact, sustainable development patterns." That's a big, Burnhamlike idea with far-reaching implications. Check out a draft at **goto2040.org**.

But as with Burnham's Plan, the specific and difficult choices that inevitably will have to be made — choices between bullet trains to St. Louis, say, or express elevated trains to O'Hare International Airport — are left to the future push-and-pull of politics and economics.

That is as it should be. Ideals stand the test of time far better than the means we choose to achieve them. Better to dream no little dreams. Then make sure our actual plans — the ones that cause bulldozers to roll and billions to be spent — are in tune with the resources of today and the technology of tomorrow

Here's one vote, then, for a few big dreams ... followed by a lot of smaller, cost-effective plans.

John McCarron teaches, consults and writes on urban affairs.

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